

SERMON AT UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM CATHOLIC CHAPLAINCY MASS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CANONISATION OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, 13 OCTOBER 2019

John Henry Newman was at one and the same time, a man of prayer, an intellectual, and a true pastor, especially to the poor and the sick of the Oratory parish in Birmingham. When he died thousands of local people, who knew nothing of his great intellectual writings, lined the streets to pay their respects to a caring priest, a true pastor of souls.

From the moment he could first read John Henry Newman became an avid reader of the Bible; at the age of just 15 he had an experience which was to shape his life. He described it as his first conversion, in that he experienced God not just as an object of belief or thought, but as the subject of an overwhelming experience in that, within himself, he discovered the presence of another in his conscience and heart whom he recognised as God. From that moment God would be at the centre of his life and thought. Newman recognised the fundamental truth that it is necessary for our ideas concerning God to be as clear and precise as possible, because the way in which we think about God shapes very much the way we pray and relate to Him. The young Newman was a brilliant scholar, so much so that his father enrolled him at Trinity College, Oxford, when he was only 16. He did, however, struggle with his final exams and so didn't then achieve his true potential. He was, however, to remain at Oxford, as undergraduate and then as Fellow of Oriel College, for some 28 years, one third of his life.

He was also one of the most influential preachers of his time, even though he did everything that we are told today not to do when preaching; his sermons were long, rarely less than 30 minutes; he read them without any eye contact with the congregation; he spoke quickly in a voice which many described as 'musical', and he left long pauses between his sentences! But he had an amazing ability to raise hearts and minds to God. Those listening described him as someone who knew personally the One of whom he spoke, and as someone who also knew the hearts of those to whom he spoke; he had an ability then to empathise with his listeners. Over and over again in his preaching, and I for one am greatly heartened by this, Newman emphasises the need for a personal encounter with God in the depths of our being. He insists that the Christian, who tries to live in the presence of God through continual acts of prayer, is never alone: "It is in the solitude of our own 'heart' that we find God for we are never less alone than when alone" (Apologia). He invites his listeners, and those who read his many writings, to reflect on what it is that makes a Christian. For Newman the 'true Christian' is one who has a deep sense of God's presence within them 'through the Holy Spirit'. He continually emphasises that faith involves the whole person and not just their intellect or reasoning capacity. He

makes the point that 'faith' is not merely a matter of adhering to certain ideas or beliefs, but it is more in the nature of a personal encounter with God, or a desire for such an encounter. It involves, he says, a 'preparation of the heart'. If God is indeed an inner presence and not just a mere idea, then Newman suggests that we must ask God for the grace to be more open to that presence. "To have faith in God is to surrender one's self to God, humbly to put one's interests, or to wish to be allowed to put them, into His hands who is the Sovereign Giver of all good." (Faith and Obedience, Parochial and Plain Sermons, III, p80)

He shares beautifully with us his own experience of responding to God's call: "God has determined, unless I interfere with his plan, that I should reach that which will be my greatest happiness. He looks on me individually, He calls me by my name, He knows what I can do, what I can best be, what is my greatest happiness, and he means to give it to me'. He goes on to develop this: 'God knows what is my greatest happiness, but I do not. There is no rule about what is happy and good; what suits one would not suit another. And the ways in which perfection is reached vary very much; the medicines necessary for our souls are very different from each other. Thus God leads us by strange ways; we know He wills our happiness, but we neither know what our happiness is, nor the way. We are blind; left to ourselves we should take the wrong way; we must leave it to Him" He further develops this by speaking of what this might mean for each of our lives: 'God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for his purposes...I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work.' (Meditations on Christian doctrine, March 6 & 7, 1848).

While on holiday in Sicily Newman fell seriously ill and sensed there that God was calling him to some particular work in England. When he recovered he wrote one of his best known and loved hymns, "Lead Kindly Light". The particular work he felt called to was to be the 'Oxford Movement'; a call to the Church of England to find a 'via media' between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism; it was also a call to spiritual renewal through rediscovering the sacraments, liturgy and a life of prayer. But sadly, as time went by, Newman had growing doubts about this 'via media' and gradually came to recognise the Roman Catholic Church as the true heir to the Church of the Apostles. Newman left his teaching post at Oxford and the Church of England and, on 9 October 1845, he was received into the full communion of

the Roman Catholic Church by Fr. (now Blessed) Dominic Barberi, a Passionist priest, at Littlemore in Oxfordshire.

Newman's life as a Catholic was not always easy, because some of his former Anglican colleagues were angry with him for becoming a Roman Catholic and persuading many other colleagues to join him in doing so, and he was also often misunderstood by some within the Catholic Church who were threatened by some of his views. His writing in 1864 of the *Apologia*, a sort of intellectual biography, was a turning point for Newman in that it was widely well received and helped people, both within and outside of church circles, to recognise him as a man of integrity who had not always been treated fairly. Finally, in 1879 at the age of 78, he was made a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII, and he took the motto, 'Cor ad cor loquitur' 'Heart speaks to heart', which he borrowed from St Francis de Sales (*Treatise on the love of God*, Book VI, chapter 1). This honour was well received, as an honour not only conferred on Newman, but on England. One Anglican friend described Newman at that time as the most loved man in all England, and saw in him, because of that love, a powerful force for unity between all Christians. It would be wonderful if all Christians here in England could look upon Newman's Canonisation in that same way. Let me emphasise: John Henry Newman is not some plaster saint; he was very human; he had his highs and his lows, he experienced failures and disappointments. He also knew University life, and so if we seek his prayerful intercession, he can be a true friend in heaven to you, to all of us.

St John Henry Newman, pray for us!